

CLE Writing Retreat 2015: 8-10 April 2015: Hitchin Priory

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This year's residential CLE Writing Retreat, the seventh in consecutive years, took place between the 8-10th of April at The Priory in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. It was agreed at the event that Hitchin was far enough away not to feel like a UoB venue, but near enough to be easy to get to. This sense of space and dislocation was very much appreciated by the members of the group.

Background

The Writing Retreat process began in 2009 when the first retreat was held at Streatley, Oxfordshire. This retreat and that held at Highgate Hall in Northants in 2010 were organised by the University's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to produce two internally published books charting different departmental perspectives on the significant curriculum changes introduced during that time.

Since 2011 and up to the current event, Writing Retreats have had a different purpose: to produce individually authored articles for externally published academic journals.

The three-day Writing Retreat is the end of a nine-month, fully supported process. Calls for expressions of interest go out in July, and participants must then pass certain milestones by specific dates. (For example, the abstract must be submitted by a certain date; a first draft must be completed by a certain date.) By adhering to these milestone dates we are able to keep a check on the numbers who apply, but it also serves the function of ensuring that everyone is aware of his or her own target when it comes to the event itself.

The Writing Retreat objective forms part of the CLE's strategy to support the University's ethos of scholarship by encouraging academic writing for publication.

Writing Retreats allow participants the opportunity to dedicate time and concentration to a specific piece of writing with the support of their colleagues. By taking the colleague away from his or her more customary work patterns and rhythms of the working week, the Writing Retreat provides space to focus. Although the three days are busy with activities, workshops and tasks, the focus is very much on completing the paper in question.

2015 Retreat

In attendance at this year's event were twelve participants from the University, from a variety of departments (although this particular event was represented by HSS more than in any other year). One participant had had to withdraw at a late stage due to a long-term illness.

Everyone arrived early and so we started on time. The exercise was to introduce, not only oneself but also one's paper, to the rest of the group. Each participant had to explain what had led to the composition of the paper and what he or she believed still had to be done. The participant also explained the reasoning behind the choice of publication that it would be sent to (this choice had also been made as part of the selection process for the event itself). The rest of the group was then allowed to ask

questions or ask for clarification. Although this activity was done in a spirit of support and goodwill, it did mean that everyone had to 'defend' his or her own work. No Powerpoint was permitted at any point during the event; everyone had to rely on a voice.

The participants had been divided into groups at the beginning of the year, when first drafts had been due in. We now split into those groups and began a peer review exercise. I hosted one group and one of the participants who had been to a retreat before hosted the other group. In groups, we discussed each of that group's papers in turn, commenting on both positive and negative factors.

This was then the starting point for the first writing session of the day – but each of these activities (on all three days) had the added motive of getting the members of the group to know each other. It worked; the group bonded very quickly (faster than in any other year, in fact). There was definite feeling in the room that participants were able to open themselves to their colleagues and were ready for further challenges and activities. A supportive 'community of practice' had been established by the time lunch was served on the first day.

For the next two days we continued the arrangement of a prompt start at 9 a.m. which would gather everyone together for a group activity or two. The Agenda was as follows. Having learned from previous retreats, I thought it was very important to balance activities with dedicated writing time. Although I had a paper of my own to complete (my rules are the same for myself as for the participants, including deadlines), I stayed in the main teaching room so that I could be on hand to read and comment on drafts where required. I was pleased that people offered to read one another's developed drafts as well, without my having to ask them to. Not only did several of the papers have themes that overlapped, the group had become increasingly cordial with one another.

Each of the participants completed a finished draft of his or her own paper. Several people submitted to their chosen journal on the final day; others needed a bit longer to tidy up references (for example) but have since submitted.

Agenda

Writing Retreat: 8-10 April 2015: The Hitchin Priory

Hosted by: **David Mathew** (Centre for Learning Excellence)

For directions to The Priory click [here](#). (Buses 100, 101 and 102 also leave Church Street in Luton and go to Hitchin regularly.)

Wednesday 8 April		
Time	Activity	Led by
9.00	Arrival (tea and coffee)	
9.30	Introduction to the Retreat Individual presentations (no Powerpoint will be available!)	David
10.15	Group activity: Peer Review of Papers in your	David

	Groups	
13.00	Lunch + check in to hotel rooms	All
14.00	How to Go About Publishing a Book (Part 1)	Kate and Liesl
15.00	Writing time	All
18.00	Review of what's been achieved (Where to next?)	David
19.00	Dinner	All
Thursday 9 April		
9.00	Revision and Reflection	David
9.30	How to Go About Publishing a Book (Part 2)	Kate and Liesl
10.30	Writing time	David
13.00	Lunch	All
14.00	Writing time	All
17.30	Free time	All
19.00	Dinner	All
Friday 25 April		
9.00	Progress report	
9.30/10.00	Writing time	All
12.30	Lunch	
14.00	Finishing off – and sending off your paper to the journal!	All
15.00	Evaluation: What next?	All
15.30	Finish... and relax.	

Feedback

'Thank you so much for the opportunity of the writing retreat. I have completed my article over the weekend (as discussed) and sent it off for review already to a journal. *Kyrmypa/Culture* is an international, academic, and peer-reviewed journal (print and online) published quarterly by MI-AN Publishing, division of Centre for Culture and Cultural Studies. It publishes high quality research articles and innovative writing in the broad realm of cultural research. It encourages submissions that display critical innovation, political intervention and creative textuality.'

'The whole process was amazing and I can't thank you and the CLE enough for the opportunity. The feedback Kate and I received for our workshops was very positive and it seems as if people found it beneficial.'

'Thank you very much for the great and productive time on the writing retreat. Your management of this event was outstanding and the all colleagues were great.'

'I thought this retreat was great... it might be easier in future not to schedule the retreat in children's holiday periods as it makes child care complex when not in school. I thought the group were great and felt that the activity/ writing time balance worked well. The feedback session is always really helpful and gets people focussed. I would not change any of the activities or structure – think it all works great. Was very impressed with people's creative ideas about books!'

‘Brilliant and thoroughly enjoyable.’

‘Encouraging and stimulating.’

‘Excellent retreat. Thoughtful and encouraging programme – well worth every minute! Thank you!’

‘I have enjoyed the teaching sessions + learnt from them. However they eat into writing time. What about scheduling them for an hour after dinner, 8-9 p.m.?’

‘Brilliant collegiate atmosphere. Balance of group activity and individual time about right to maximise my writing – a little bit of time pressure is a motivation.’

‘The management and structure are great, participants are wonderful. I came with no expectations so finish with great energy + full of thought. Topical – all food& interaction are fantastic. Thank you.’

‘Really enjoyed the teaching sessions – really helpful. Pity about the internet* as this restricted & caused some discomfort. Otherwise a great experience!!!’

‘Great 3 days to focus on writing, very relaxed. Thank you David for your hard work and organisation.’

‘Peer support was excellent. Time out to write, it’s great.’

‘Very well facilitated.’

‘What went really well: was the sense of space, support and collegial valuing of one another. The balance of input & space to write alone was improved on this occasion. David’s approach generated a positive working environment.

